

EDITORIAL

FRESH WATER SOURCE

Diem Vuong may provide department with a huge supply of scarce product

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Monday, June 20, 2005 - In the business world, when an executive leaves to "pursue other interests," it means he isn't leaving of his own accord. But at the Long Beach Water Department, when Diem Vuong leaves next month, it means exactly what it says, only more so. Vuong will pursue his passion, which is turning ocean water into drinking water.

Vuong already has made the Water Department mildly famous for developing what has become known as the Long Beach Method of desalting water. He ignored conventional belief, which was that it took high pressure and high doses of costly electric power to do the job, and devised a way to do it with 30 percent less energy.

This is hugely important in a parched area like Southern California, where population is swelling at the same time water supplies are receding. Vuong's innovation is doubly apt for two other reasons, which are that his technique can generate fresh water for less cost at the very time that water prices will rise because of scarcity.

Vuong's approach was to pump salt water through two sets of membranes at moderate pressure rather than one set at high pressure. The Water Department backed him with resources to create a small proof-of-concept system, which will be followed by a 300,000-gallon-a-day pilot project.

If that plant performs as well as expected, the department intends to build one 30 times bigger, put it to work as part of the municipal water system, and share the technology with publicly owned water systems in other thirsty parts of the world.

The private market is another matter. For commercial purposes, such as making seawater drinkable on an ocean-going yacht, Vuong would collect royalties, and split them with the Water Department. This would be a repayment, in part, for providing an opportunity.

Vuong came to this country with his wife and three children in 1975, one step ahead of the fall of South Vietnam. He went to work for water systems in Orange County, and in 1996 joined the Long Beach department, where he is assistant general manager. Soon, he'll be able to concentrate on his consuming interest, desalination.

If Vuong has much to be grateful for in his new homeland, so do the Water Department's customers, who could benefit greatly from a potential new source of water. A few royalties would be a nice bonus.